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SUBJECT: ECOWAS Advisory Body Urges President Tandja Not to Effect New Constitution, Warns of Possible Sanctions

¶1. On May 15-18, the Council of Wise Men of the Economic Commission of West African States (ECOWAS) held a meeting with GON officials in Niamey. The Council, an advisory body, discussed the proposed draft constitutional referendum that would lift presidential term limits, and thereby allow President Tandja to remain in office beyond the end of his current term of office, which ends in December 2009. The Council, which is made up of several respected figures from ECOWAS member states, also met with President Tandja, and reminded him of the ECOWAS' protocol on democracy and good governance, which prohibits modifying constitutions during the six-month period prior to elections. The ECOWAS Council of Wise Men urged President Tandja to refrain from making constitutional changes, and added that failure to do so could lead to ECOWAS sanctions ranging from suspension to economic blockade.

¶2. In an interview on Radio France International (RFI) on May 20, Minister of Interior Albade Abouba deflected the Council's advice, stating, "The institution (ECOWAS) as such may, by principle express its concerns. But we know very well the countries that make up ECOWAS, and we know each country's history. Therefore, at this level, I think it is better to sweep one's doorstep very well before referring to that of your neighbors."

¶3. Subsequently, President Tandja decided to ignore the advice of the ECOWAS Council, announcing officially to the National Assembly on May 23 his plan to seek a constitutional referendum.

¶4. Minimize considered.

ALLEN